

Government Deception, Disinformation, Delusion

By Tad Szulc

WASHINGTON
American foreign-policy imbrolios over Libya and Nicaragua are only the most recent examples of how easy it is to manipulate a supposedly well-informed democratic society, and how short is our institutional memory.

In this realm, we should distinguish between such notions as disinformation and deception.

Disinformation is an accepted tactic in international politics, intelligence operations and wars of nerves everywhere in the world. The East and the West expend considerable resources spreading disinformation about an endless variety of topics to affect responsive policy decisions and attitudes. The Central Intelligence Agency and the KGB can presumably claim that they have caused regimes to be toppled here and there in the Third World through imaginative disinformation coups combined with arms and money.

In the case of Libya, an example of not-so-imaginative disinformation, the Reagan Administration piously denied having undertaken to destabilize the regime of Moammar Kadafi last August, although it was painfully clear to friend and foe that the ineptly orchestrated scenario, including misinforming the American media, had been set in motion at the highest levels in Washington.

It is also useful in our shadowy world of foreign involvement to separate policy *deception*, visibly carried out by the government, and so-called covert actions conducted secretly by the same government, but on a different scale and for other reasons. Covert action may lead in time to escalation and become part of a broader deception, or it may, from the outset, be part of an enterprise of deception.

Thus the CIA began its Laos operations in the 1960s as covert activities before transforming them into full-fledged "secret war." The agency's early clandestine jabs at Cuba led to the Bay of Pigs. Covert operations in the Congo were nearly another CIA war, complete with Cuban pilots from the Bay of Pigs. CIA covert political action helped to quicken the ouster of the leftist regime of Salvador Allende in Chile. The CIA's paramilitary action in Nicaragua smoothed the way for the *contras*—and whatever may follow them.

Deception is fundamentally a national policy of considerable magnitude. Pretexts and justifications are a vital part of the scenarios. In "A Thousand Days," Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., who served as a presidential assistant during the Bay of Pigs, recalls that just weeks before the

attack he was instructed to produce a white paper on Cuba to "help clarify the new political objectives." To make the invasion and its aftermath politically acceptable, the white paper urged Fidel Castro "to sever links" with "international communism," warning that "if this call is unheeded, we are confident that the Cuban people . . . will continue to strive for a free Cuba." In as much as the CIA counted on an anti-Castro uprising to coincide with the invasion, the white paper offered the justification for U.S. support, wrongly suggesting that Cubans were ready to do away with their revolution.

Four years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson dispatched a Marine division and an airborne division to the Dominican Republic where a civil war had erupted between the rightist military establishment and the leftist supporters of a democratically elected president who had been thrown out by the army. Johnson

believed that a victory by the "constitutionalists" would result in a communist takeover and a "new Cuba," but the official justification for landing the two U.S. divisions was the need to protect and evacuate several hundred Americans and other foreigners residing in the country (though they were in no danger). U.S. forces assured the victory of the military group, but those of us who wrote news stories disputing Johnson's version of history became targets of his formidable verbal abuse.

In the Vietnam conflict, Johnson succeeded in winning congressional and public opinion support for air strikes on North Vietnam and, subsequently, for introducing 500,000 American troops in the war. It took years before it became clear that no American destroyer had been attacked by the North Vietnamese in the Tonkin Gulf, and that Johnson's claim to that effect was pure fabrication.

Unquestionably, the Reagan Administration wins new honors for deception in the service of foreign policy. In 1983 public opinion was persuaded that the ill-advised presence of U.S. Marines in Beirut would guarantee peace in Lebanon and serve our strategic needs; it led to the massive killing of Marines in a vehicle-bomb explosion. That same year the tiny island of Grenada in the eastern Caribbean, then in the throes of a savage conflict between leftist factions, was invaded by U.S. forces. Though the real reason was the Cuban military and political presence on Grenada, the official story was the evacuation of several hundred American students at the medical college there.

In Nicaragua, the Administration still does not admit that its real objective in supporting the *contras*, the chaotic rebel groups whom the Congress recently awarded \$100 million in fresh funds, is the overthrow of the Sandinista regime that is closely allied to Cuba and the Soviets. The White House continues to maintain the fiction that all the United States wants is internal democracy in that Central American republic. This is why Eugene Hasenfus, the disavowed secret warrior whose *contra* supply plane was downed by a Sandinista missile, personifies the policy of great deception—and embarrassment—as he stands trial in Managua. □

Tad Szulc is the author of a new biography of Fidel Castro, "Fidel: a Critical Portrait," to be published this month by William Morrow.